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ABSTRACT

Some important developments in the United States since the founding of Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania, in 1832 are briefly traced, and the role of colleges in preparing graduates to meet future challenges that are difficult to predict is addressed. The philosophy of education that has been followed by Gettysburg College since its founding includes the idea that liberal education liberates the mind. The curriculum emphasizes the following elements: logical thinking and clear use of language, broad diverse subject matter, and rigorous introduction to the assumptions and methods of the sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. Such a comprehensive, coherent program of studies is designed to enable individuals to respond creatively to whatever issues, problems, dilemmas, and challenges may confront them. For instance, in the late 1940s, the big issues of the 1980s (e.g., energy shortage and high levels of inflation) were not foreseen. It is suggested that a breadth of education is needed to serve as preparation for today's problems and for unknown problems of the future. For all social classes and occupational interests, a broad, liberal training rooted in practical real-world problems may be a requisite for survival and satisfaction in the future. The person best able to cope with the new is the one who has the broadest background and is thus the most flexible. In some cases today, colleges are reacting to what is perceived as demands of the market place by cutting back of liberal arts offerings and introducing specialized technical curricula with minimum liberal arts requirements. At the same time, others are emphasizing a renewal for liberal learning studies. (SW)

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GETTYSBURG COLLEGE
April 6, 1982

AN EDUCATION TO MATCH THE FUTURE

by Mark Curtis

President Glassick, Trustees, Faculty, Students, and friends of
Gettysburg College:

I am deeply touched by the honor you have conferred upon me. I am especially moved because you have incorporated me into the body of your alumni at this special convocation marking the 150th anniversary of the founding of the college. Thank you for including me in the goodly company of all those who have in the past left these halls and who will in the future leave them to serve their respective generations.

Since we are assembled here to celebrate the sesquicentennial of Gettysburg College, let us for a moment try to imagine that we were the first faculty and students who came here to teach and learn. As you think your way back to that time, ask yourselves: "What could we have predicted about the future for which we were expecting the college to prepare us -- at least in part?" Could we have foreseen that the rolling hills, forests and fruitful fields around our campus would in 31 years become the scene of a violent battle that was the turning point in a tragic civil war? How much better then could we have foretold other events, just as momentous? Those among us who believed most ardently in the "manifest destiny" of our nation might have had a vision of its eventual territorial expansion to the Pacific Coast, but hardly any of us would have dreamed that this goal would be reached in less than twenty years and that in another fifteen it would be surpassed by the purchase of Alaska. And what about technological developments? A few of us might have heard of a locomotive because four years earlier the first railway line, all of fourteen miles long, had opened, but only the most visionary among us would have had the soaring imagination to predict that the first transcontinental railroad would be completed by 1869. And who

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among us would have known that Samuel Morse, a young artist, had just returned in 1832 from Europe with plans for a new system of rapid, indeed almost instantaneous, communication? Only twelve years later he successfully transmitted the first intelligible message by electrical impulse on wires strung between Baltimore and Washington.

If we would have found these momentous events, occurring in one generation, beyond our powers to imagine, what could have prepared us or our descendants for the new scientific theories, the new technological applications of knowledge, both destructive and beneficial, new methods of communication and transportation, and new ways of life that come in rapid succession during succeeding generations down to the present? Could we, for instance, have dreamed that some day 75% of our nation's people would live in large metropolitan centers instead of the small towns, villages and farms we knew so well? Finally, would any of us, however inspired by our work in establishing a new seat of learning, have dared speculate that some day the number of students enrolled in colleges and universities would nearly equal the total population of the country in 1832?

Now let us return to the present. My purpose in exercising our historical imagination in this fashion is to prepare us for the main question that should preoccupy us on this occasion of both celebration and rededication. Put historically, the question is: "What kind of an education would have adequately prepared students of 1832 or 1882 or 1932 to have dealt with the vicissitudes of their generation?" If the most consequential developments that would face them were obscured by an inscrutable future, the faculty could hardly devise specialized courses of study to forearm them. Translated into terms relevant to our own time, the question is: "What kind of education will match the challenges of the future facing students today?"

I submit that the answer to both forms of the question is the one that

Gettysburg College offered to its students in 1832 and still provides for its students today. It is found in the philosophy of education appearing in the college catalogue. It reads in part: "Gettysburg College believes that liberal education liberates the human mind from many of the constraints and limitations of its finiteness ... [It] believes that it owes its students a coherent curriculum that emphasizes the following elements:

1. Logical, precise thinking and clear use of language, both spoken and written ...
2. Broad diverse subject matter ...
3. Rigorous introduction to the assumptions and methods of ... the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities ...

This philosophy of liberal education is grounded on the premise that such a comprehensive, coherent program of studies will not only free but empower human beings to respond creatively to whatever issues, problems, dilemmas and challenges may confront them.

Despite the academic fads that have tended in recent years to deprecate liberal learning, persons of wide knowledge and experience have with increasing frequency testified to its value, both for the individual and for society, faced with the unknown challenges of the future. In an interview published in Forbes Magazine, John Sawhill, leader in business, government and higher education, recently stated:

I think my own career testifies to the value of a broad education. I couldn't have prepared for the kind of career that I've had, as a business executive, a government executive and a university executive. There's no way to study for all that ... I took a fairly broad range of courses in the liberal arts that have given me an ability to solve problems, to develop analytical skills, to communicate effectively, to

understand science and to deal with quantitative method. If we continue to train people as we are today in very narrow specializations we are going to find our institutions lacking in the kind of leadership they will need to solve the problems they are going to encounter."

Likewise President John Kemeny of Dartmouth, after he had finished the task of being Chairman of the Commission on the Three Mile Island Accident, expressed dismay that the Commission had uncovered widespread confusion about what could be done and what should be done among experts and others in positions of responsibility. In reflecting on how to correct such a situation, he decided that a sound liberal education could make a significant contribution. Noting that colleges prepare students to be leaders in public or private affairs within thirty to thirty-five years, he recalled that in the late 1940s, no one had foreseen the big issues of the 1980s such as an energy shortage, or the hazards of nuclear power plants, or high levels of inflation. He concluded that neither he nor anyone else can know what the big issues will be when students today will be at the height of their careers. Hence he declared that no course of specialized college education can prepare them to deal with the actual problems that will confront them. He then stated: "What we must somehow do is prepare them no matter what these problems turn out to be ... And that means that we have to give them a breadth of education that will prepare them not for the problems we know today but for the problems that we don't know today."

And finally, from a close student of the employment patterns of our society comes this telling comment which appears in his book Work, Learning, and the American Future:

For all social classes and occupational interests and abilities, a broad, liberal training rooted in practical real-world problems may be a requisite for survival and satisfaction in the future. In a job environment dominated

by change, these will be marketable skills: the ability to understand one's relationship to one's environment, to control the elements in one's life, to understand one's self, to be sensitive to others and to nature, to be able to form one's values in an ethical perspective, to be able to synthesize and analyze issues and problems, to be adaptable, flexible and curious, to be able to communicate and to lead. All we know for certain about the future is that it will be turbulent and filled with unpredictable alterations. Historically, the people most able to adapt to the vicissitudes of social life have been the liberally educated, for whom learning has always been a way of life. The person who has learned how to learn can always pick up a skill that has become essential. The person best able to cope with the new is the one who has the broadest background and is thus the most flexible. I see no reason to believe that these characteristics will be any less necessary as the speed of change accelerates in the future.⁽¹⁾

If liberal learning is of such immense value to us as individuals, but especially to the future well being of our society, then it truly deserves constant nurture and support.

Unfortunately liberal learning today is suffering from two debilitating conditions. On the one hand, the public, and particularly students, do not understand and appreciate the importance of liberal learning. Almost any newspaper carries this time of the year stories that illustrate this point. Students, anxious about first jobs at the highest possible salaries, are choosing programs of study in narrow specialized technical fields and are failing to get the breadth and fullness of education that will stand by them after their first job has reached a dead end. Studies such as the recent one which demonstrates that liberal arts

(1) James O'Toole, Work, Learning and the American Future, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977, pp. 146-147.

graduates have a better chance than graduates in business and engineering for promotion to middle levels of management in a corporation like AT&T may eventually change this attitude, but have not as yet had much effect.

On the other hand, an even more serious condition troubles liberal learning within colleges and universities themselves. Its diagnosis is a complicated matter. In some cases, colleges and universities, catering to what is perceived as demands of the marketplace, are cutting back on their offerings in liberal learning and introducing specialized technical curricula with a bare minimum of work in the liberal arts. Perhaps more widespread is a breakdown in the concept of liberal education among the faculty and academic leaders of colleges and universities. The symptoms of this weakness can be seen in the incoherence and overspecialization in programs of study in fields that are commonly thought to belong to the liberal arts. The gravity of this situation is conveyed by a cri de coeur voiced by a recent Executive Director of the Modern Language Association who has declared: "We have got to liberalize our graduate and undergraduate programs." And finally, we have lost a sense of what it means to be an educated person. We need to discover what program of studies today will arm students with the intellectual proficiencies, the scope of knowledge, the attitudes and values, and a working hypothesis about the relation of the parts to the whole that comprises a genuinely complete and generous education to match the future.

Fortunately, the tradition of liberal learning -- going back to classical times -- is both resilient and evolutionary, or perhaps it would be juster to say that the tradition of liberal learning is resilient because it is evolutionary. In the long course of history, it has suffered other periods of decline, if not eclipse, and recovered its strength because faithful scholars and teachers discovered for their generations the new forms and programs of liberal learning that were required to free the human mind from the fears, illusions and misunderstandings

of their times and restore its creativity.

As I speak to you, I have a strong sense that we are witnessing another period of renewal for liberal learning. These signs give me hope: There is abroad in the land growing concern with the deficiencies in our current undergraduate programs and acknowledgement in widening circles that these deficiencies can and must be overcome. Secondly, leadership needed for the reform of undergraduate liberal education is beginning to appear. In a recent survey made by the Carnegie Council, college and university presidents ranked "improved academic programs" at the top of the list of changes that they wished to see in the decade of the 1980s. Phrases like "strengthening the liberal arts" and finding a new definition of an educated person explained what they meant. Finally, liberal learning continues to thrive in strongholds like Gettysburg College.

Because liberal learning is so important for our future, because it has, if I am right, a chance to set its house in order and win again public understanding and support, and because good examples will quicken the advance of its cause, it is most fitting that Gettysburg College on this sesquicentennial is not only celebrating its distinguished past but is rededicating itself to liberal education and its role in American life. All colleges and universities in the land, and not only those that I represent, will benefit from the imagination, moral courage, and persistence you bring to the task of asking critical questions about the nature of liberal learning and of developing conceptual principles for undergirding and strengthening it. Your work and example can help make it an education to match the future.